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STILL ON THE CASE

Assassination buff Paul Hoch did not plan on his odyssey into secret files and boundless enigmas.

But he is compelled to discover exactly what happened that November day in Dallas.



David Weintrob

Hoch at his home in Berkeley. "You really hate to let it rest," he says. At right: President Kennedy in Dallas, moments before he was shot.

BY BOB KATZ



On November 22, 1963, Paul Hoch was a senior at Harvard, majoring in physics. Yes, he remembers vividly where he was when he heard the news that President John F. Kennedy had been shot (he was finishing a late lunch at Leverett Dining Hall), and no, there was nothing in his immediate response (normal shock) or his personal history (achievement-oriented science major) to indicate that 25 years later he would still be devoting much of his time and energy to probing the limitless mysteries of Dallas.

After graduating from Harvard in the spring of 1964, Hoch went west to study elementary particle physics at the University of California at Berkeley. It was an exciting field and an exciting time, with major new discoveries being made regularly. Gradually, mainly through the highly publicized criticisms of the Warren Commission report, he became aware of controversies regarding the investigation of the assassination, and, for reasons that are as hidden and hazy and deep and ultimately inexplicable as all lifelong intrigues, Paul

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BOB KATZ IS PRESIDENT OF THE K & S SPEAKERS BUREAU. HE WAS THE DIRECTOR OF THE ASSASSINATION INFORMATION BUREAU, A PUBLIC INTEREST ORGANIZATION THAT LOBBIED FOR REINVESTIGATING THE ASSASSINATIONS OF JOHN F. KENNEDY AND MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Hoch decided to look into it on his own.

It cost \$76 to purchase from the Government Printing Office a complete set of all 26 volumes of the hearings and exhibits of the Warren Commission investigation. The commission, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, had concluded in September 1964 that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone and unaided in the murder of President Kennedy. Yet much of the commission's own published evidence raised questions about its conclusions.

The amount of information contained in the 26 volumes, raw and unreferenced, was staggering. There were statements from dozens of eyewitnesses on the grassy knoll, testimony from the surgeons at Parkland Hospital, where Ken-

nedy died; laboratory tests on rifles and bullet fragments; affidavits from FBI agents and Secret Service men. The investigative trail seemed fresh with possibilities. Promising leads abounded, if you believed that the case was not yet closed.

When Jack Ruby shot and killed Oswald, Paul Hoch was far from alone in realizing that there would be no public airing of the assassination evidence. How many shots had been fired at the motorcade, and from what direction? Why the discrepancies between the observations of the doctors in Dallas and those at the autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital? Was there any meaning to the hyperactive chaos of Oswald's short life? Any citizen could pore over the Warren volumes with the legitimate aim of dis-

covering previously buried information that might shed new light on that horrible episode. The Crime of the Century had yet to be satisfactorily solved. It was, to say the least, an alluring challenge.

Over the past 25 years, other events, violent and dramatic in their own way, have laid claim to the label "crime of the century." Jack Ruby's name has become an oft-employed entry in trivia quizzes. Time marches on. The jigsaw puzzle of whatever happened that day in Dallas lies dusty and unfinished beside the armchair, nearly forgotten — except by those few who won't, or can't, give it up.

Paul Hoch was born in England 46 years ago, of Austrian parents who had fled the encroachment of Hitler. His mother was a pathologist, his father a chemist. When he was 8 the family emigrated to Charlottesville, Virginia, where he was raised. In high school, Hoch was shy, intellectual, persistent, and precise, with an abiding interest in science. He was perfect for science.

Hoch resembles a Norman Rockwell depiction of modest, middle-class normalcy. His bright red hair lends an almost cherubic gleam to the subdued features of his personality, from his calm, soft voice to his slight build to his preference for clothing that is practical and basic and drab. Married and the father of two girls, Hoch lives on a quiet street of nicely lawned ranch houses in Berkeley.

Although Hoch now has a PhD in physics, he does not work or teach in that field. Somewhere along the way, physics ceased to absorb him. He is employed as a computer

programmer and analyst for the university administration. He works only two-thirds time, needing all the extra hours to continue his research on the Kennedy assassination.

Like the curator Nicholas Branch in *Libra*, Don DeLillo's novel about the JFK assassination, Hoch maintains vast files of documents and a sprawling library of articles and books concerned directly with the case or with tangential subjects such as the U-2 spy program (Oswald was stationed at the Air Force base in Japan from which the secret flights were launched and was a defector in the Soviet Union when Francis Gary Powers was shot down there) or the civil rights movement in the South (Oswald attempted to register to vote in the town of Clinton, Louisiana, during the same week of August 1963 that activists were staging a voter-registration drive there). Such fragments of information may be glistening stones in some emerging mosaic, or filler for yet another bulging file cabinet.

Whereas once there were millions of people sufficiently troubled about the assassination to lobby their congressmen and write newspaper editors, and many thousands more who undertook some form of armchair inquiry — from analyzing photographs in *Life* magazine to simply clipping articles — there are now perhaps fewer than 1,000 who would call themselves active buffs. To these, Hoch circulates a newsletter called *Echoes of Conspiracy*, wherein he notes developments in the case, highlighting new research, media coverage, book reviews, and the oddball tabloid flotsam that is never far off shore. Regarding the effort in 1980 by writer Michael Edowes to have Oswald's body

exhumed (Eddowes claimed a phony Oswald had been shot and buried), Hoch commented in his newsletter, "If anyone can figure out what keeps getting Eddowes all this publicity, let me know; some of us could use it."

Hoch's approach to the assassination has been a cross between sleuth and scholar. He has submitted dozens of Freedom of Information Act requests over the years to the FBI, CIA, and other government agencies and has been singularly successful in acquiring documents that have been recently declassified or bureaucratically buried. Neither a journalist nor a writer (although he did edit, with Peter Dale Scott and Russell Stetler, an anthology of writings on the JFK case called *The Assassinations: Dallas and Beyond*), he has been uncommonly selfless in sharing the results of his efforts with anyone who cares to pay attention or professes a desire to help. Leads that he develops are freely handed out to any journalists willing to take the initiative. "I recognize that I don't have the sort of skill it takes to directly question someone," Hoch concedes, "but that's just me. I didn't like to phone up girls in high school, either."

Hoch has made a virtual specialty of identifying acts of government malfeasance and obfuscation, be they by the FBI, the Secret Service, the Dallas police, or the military services, and he also has proceeded, with an almost ingenuous faith, to appeal to these same institutions for the very documentation needed to verify the alleged misdeeds. When he comes up with a lead, he may send off a memo to the Justice Department advising ways it can follow up. To Hoch this is not a

contradiction. "I'm not as negative about government agencies as others are," he explains. "When I get something, I have an obligation to do something with it. I don't believe the FBI will just toss it in the trash. At the very least I'm making someone look things up."

Americans are conditioned to denigrate and be suspicious of anyone driven toward a goal most of us consider unusual or lacking in normal allurements. We have a terminology that reflects a bias against endeavors outside our standard values of profit and fame: Such people are odd, weird, warped, even demented.

Yet Paul Hoch, by all accounts, has only one truly strange quirk. He still strives to know just what happened that day in Dallas. And he thinks he might be onto something with the Naval Intelligence files.

In 1967 Hoch requested from the National Archives a thick file on Lee Harvey Oswald maintained by the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). In the years after the release of the Warren report, Hoch had grown increasingly involved in researching the case, to the point where he would spend vacation time visiting the National Archives in Washington (trips east doubled as opportunities to see his parents in Virginia), where he could review many of the unpublished papers of the Warren Commission.

Hoch had seen references to the ONI file in some of the internal memorandums of the commission, and he speculated that such a file might contain interesting information, because Oswald had been a Marine (which fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Navy). Because Oswald had learned to speak Russian while

in the Marines and had defected to the Soviet Union immediately after leaving the corps, there had been speculation that he might have been affiliated with a US intelligence operation. The existence of an ONI file on him would be worth researching.

Obtaining the ONI file was surprisingly easy. Hoch discussed his request with Marion Johnson, the head archivist, during a visit to Washington and soon thereafter received in the mail a microfilm copy (minus only a few pages, which were, and still are, classified). He had the microfilm printed up in California.

The ONI file consisted of 325 pages, much of it referring in that starkly bland syntax of obligatory military memos to a variety of seemingly trivial acts such as logging incoming requests for information. If it weren't for the fact that so

many of these memos were dated November 22 and 23, 1963, Hoch would have had difficulty summoning even a minor curiosity about the contents.

In fact, he paid scant attention to the file. There was so much else going on in 1967. The Freedom of Information Act, which allows citizens to examine records of government agencies, had been enacted, and Hoch was busy requisitioning far more intriguing files from the Mexico City station of the CIA. (In October 1963, Oswald had gone to Mexico City in a failed attempt to obtain a visa to travel to Cuba, after which he relocated to Dallas.) Also, the district attorney in New Orleans, Jim Garrison, had launched a highly publicized conspiracy investigation, with the promise of indictments, based on Oswald's activities and associations as a resident of that city during the summer be-

fore the assassination.

"When I first received it, I don't think the ONI file struck me as very interesting," says Hoch of his long delay in tackling the material. "I didn't have a context for the information that was in it."

But the Kennedy assassination is the essence of context, spanning our recent history from an era of relative innocence, when official pronouncements were taken at face value by the public and a trusting fourth estate, to our present time of pervasive distrust of all officialdom. Scenarios that were inconceivable to all but the avowedly paranoid in 1963 — FBI blackmail campaigns, military disinformation, the great sprawl of subterfuge and deceit now known generically as Watergate — have become incorporated into our system of political intuitions. A Naval Intelligence memo recorded at a mo-

ment of great national crisis might resound today with a different inflection, a more poignant enunciation, than it did in a former time. Context would emerge.

Throughout this period Hoch was still a graduate student in physics at Berkeley, but he was spending increasing amounts of time on the JFK case. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 and, two months later, Robert Kennedy, hardly convinced Hoch that this was an irrelevant quest.

Moreover, Hoch's field of concentration, particle physics, was undergoing a metamorphosis. An exciting burst of creativity brought about by the research of Nobel laureate Luis Alvarez had given way, in Hoch's words, to a distinctly less spectacular search "for bumps on a graph."

Hoch worked on a research team affiliated with Alvarez, who coincidentally had worked with *Life* magazine in analyzing some of the physical evidence. During a discussion one day, Alvarez asked Hoch what he thought was the strongest argument against the lone-assassin interpretation, and Hoch answered that he considered the drastic backward snap of Kennedy's head, in response to the final shot, to be crucial. In the famous Zapruder 8mm home movie of the motorcade in Dallas, Kennedy's head can be seen snapping violently backward upon impact of the shot, a response seemingly inconsistent with Oswald's location directly behind and above the president's limousine. Citing a basic law of physics, Hoch argued that gunfire from the rear would not produce the back-snap effect.

Alvarez was not so sure,

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and he thought this could be tested. He and Hoch rigged up a simulation, using melons that approximated the weight and density of a human skull, taping them with "skin," attaching the finished products to necklike spindles. At a rifle range near San Leandro, California, they test-fired on these melons, and, to Hoch's surprise and Alvarez's satisfaction, on some shots the melon jerked back toward the source of fire. The fatal shot might certainly have come from the Texas School Book Depository. To his disappointed fellow buffs, Hoch hastened to explain, "All this gives us is a counter example. It's not clear proof one way or the other."

Nonetheless, among the community of amateur researchers working on the case, the melon tests served to further Hoch's growing reputation as an agnostic. He would leap to no conclusions other than to make the indisputable charge that vital information was still being withheld. Let others accuse LBJ, the CIA, or whomever. Paul Hoch would state only that much more needed to be known.

In the mid-1970s, due to a more skeptical hindsight cast by the Watergate experience, there was a renewed public call to reexamine the John F. Kennedy assassination. In 1977, Congress established the House Select Committee on Assassinations, known as HSCA, to probe the murders of both John Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

After a two-year investigation, the HSCA, to the gratifica-

tion of most buffs and the essential indifference of just about everyone else, concluded in its final report in 1979 that "President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy." While declining to name the culprits, the HSCA did engage in rather explicit speculation as to who, in its words, "had the motive, means, and opportunity" to accomplish the assassination. The finger was clearly pointed at organized crime, specifically two mobsters notoriously antagonistic to the Kennedy administration: Carlos Marcello of New Orleans and Santos Trafficante of Florida.

Hoch had played a fringe role in advising the HSCA. His expertise and general good sense were valued by some of the staff investigators. Throughout the investigation he was encouraged, unofficially, to communicate his recommendations concerning areas of inquiry. Hoch urged the HSCA to look into the role, before and after the shooting, of military intelligence agencies.

"Innocent, guilty, framed, whatever — Oswald is the central character," Hoch reasons. "As soon as you're talking about Oswald, you're talking about the center of the mystery. These intelligence files, even if they're only a limited issue, are central because they deal with Oswald."

Although the HSCA discovered nothing conclusive in this area, it did publish the dramatic revelation that the Army, in what the Army said was routine housecleaning of its data on nonmilitary personnel, had de-

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stroyed its intelligence files on Oswald. (Despite numerous requests, these files had never been provided to the Warren Commission.) The HSCA found this "extremely troublesome" and noted that "the question of Oswald's possible affiliation with military intelligence could not be fully resolved."

Hoch turned back to the 325-page Naval Intelligence file he had received from the National Archives back in 1967. Now he had a context in which to look at it anew:

He began with the basic assumption that upon learning of Oswald's ar-

rest in Dallas, every intelligence agency in the United States must have headed straight to the letter *O* in its files.

From recently declassified FBI documents, Hoch had learned that at 3:15 p.m. on November 22, only 75 minutes after Oswald was arrested in the darkened Texas Theater, Lt. Col. Robert E. Jones of the 112th Army Intelligence Group in San Antonio had contacted the FBI. Jones wanted the FBI to know that Oswald was carrying a Selective Service card with the name of Alex Hidell and that Army Intelligence records indicated that Hidell was

known to have been active in a pro-Castro "Hands Off Cuba" political campaign.

From his own research, Hoch knew that "Hidell" was actually an alias used by Oswald, but at the time of Oswald's arrest this was known only to the accused and perhaps a few confidants. Lt. Col. Jones' information directed the FBI toward a possible conspirator named Hidell, someone with pro-Castro sympathies. What was this about?

Hoch had urged the HSCA to make a special effort to clarify the activities of Jones — in particular, how Jones, in San Antonio, was so promptly ap-

prised of the contents of Oswald's wallet. Was Army Intelligence being provided rapid updates of the interrogation of Oswald? If so, why? The HSCA interviewed Jones, but the transcripts of that interview remain classified.

In its final report, the HSCA stated only that "questions had been raised about the contents of some FBI communications on November 22, 1963, that reflected information allegedly provided by military intelligence. In his testimony, Jones clarified several points and corrected several errors in these communications."

Hoch found this highly unsa-

tisfying, and he hoped the ONI files might fill in the picture. They portray a flurry of activity around an office referred to in memorandums as USNAVCINT-SUPPCEN in Arlington, Virginia.

As Hoch pieces it together, the "Oswald" file of ONI was reviewed late in the afternoon of November 22 by the director and assistant director of Naval Intelligence. During this time they received a request from Gen. Joseph F. Carroll of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA was a new super-agency created by the Kennedy administration to coordinate military intelligence) to see Navy infor-

mation on Oswald.

Adm. Rufus Taylor, the director of Naval Intelligence, instructed the duty officer "to prepare a file" to be passed to Carroll. "This file is to be carried to Admiral Taylor's office by special agent Bliss," according to one memo, "who will then carry the file to General Carroll who will peruse the file and return it to the special agent."

"In other words," Hoch interprets, "the general who headed the DIA could look at but not keep the file."

Hoch ponders Adm. Taylor's choice of words in instructing the duty officer to "prepare a file." He is like a constitutional scholar, combing through the preliminary drafts of a manuscript in search of original intent. One memo, undated and unsigned, states: "0900 — briefed Taylor on three files."

Late on the night of November 22, the ONI file, in the custody of Capt. Elmo R. Zumwalt (later to head naval operations), was taken to a special meeting at the State Department, where it was reviewed by several men, including two prominent Kennedy loyalists, Fred Dutton of the State Department and Adam Yarmolinsky, undersecretary for defense. Also present was the counsel for the Defense Department, John McNaughton, who noticed that the ONI Oswald file referred to three documents that were not included. Despite a cover statement that the missing material con-

sisted only of letters of transmittal, according to one memo, McNaughton "expressed a strong desire to review the documents." Hoch wonders, did McNaughton suspect something?

November 22 was a day of tragedy and also high drama. People with access to fragmentary pieces of the puzzle were cautious with what they had, or thought they had. Like a scientist, Paul Hoch gauges by the meager tools available to him the complex reactions at the edges of a problem, hypothesizing the truth at the impenetrable center.

Hoch believes there is something important in the Navy's relationship to Oswald. He wants more information on why the military files have been treated with such secrecy and deceit. Explanations might range from mundane bureaucratic privacy to the most explosive revelation: Oswald as military spy. Other buffs might find in this the stuff of haunting speculation, but Hoch will go no further than to say, "This is a set of problems that is ripe to get at."

And this is now where the matter rests. For the moment, Paul Hoch can take us no further. There is no wrap-up, no punch line, no sound bite. In a month, or a year, Hoch might acquire more documents, more peripheral background elucidation, and another scrap of the jigsaw might slip into a perfectly contoured vacancy. A mystery gone on for so long can wait a little longer for resolution.

Early each morning, Paul Hoch heads out to his office on the Berkeley campus, and he is usually home by early afternoon. It's a modest, responsible life he leads with his wife, Sue, and his two daughters, not substantially distinct from that of millions of other average neighbors, except for those file cabinets bulging with mystery.

"Sue keeps asking me when I'm going to be done with this stuff," Hoch reports, a puckishness animating his voice, "and I tell her, 'Just as soon as I get my desk cleared off.'"

The young physicist Paul Hoch had not planned on this 25-year odyssey into secret files and boundless enigmas, and he is somewhat at a loss to explain it, even to himself. "I do seem to be perfectly willing to spend a lot of my time on something without being convinced it's related to anything spectacular," he muses almost wistfully. "I don't think in terms of solutions. It's like Physics 210. This is what I happen to be doing."

Hoch's self-effacing account calls to mind such congenial pastimes as stamp collecting or

deciphering baseball statistics. Yet mention a peripheral detail such as the Tippit killing (Dallas police officer J. D. Tippit was shot while attempting to question Oswald along the sidewalk of a residential neighborhood not long after Kennedy was killed), and Hoch's jaw braces, his voice lowers with grim resolve, and, in recognition of all the looming, unanswered questions and the brief time available to get at them, he mutters, "You really hate to let it rest."

There was a time when he thought this case might be solved, neat and clean. He no longer indulges that hope. There have also been interludes when he thought the case — and all it implies about secrecy and power and the great open sore of modern history — might slowly vanish, with no new evidence turning up, no new leads to be pursued, no nagging reminder that productive inroads might still be made.

Apparently there is another possibility that neither Paul Hoch nor anyone back on November 22, 1963, could have predicted: It might be with us for a very long time. •